



AETC News Clips

Randolph AFB, Texas



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Del Rio kills project near Laughlin AFB

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John MacCormack
Express-News Staff Writer

Heeding the voices of constituents while risking potentially expensive litigation, the Del Rio City Council has voted 5-2 to kill a huge multiuse project next to Laughlin AFB.

In pulling out of the deal with San Antonio developers John Schaefer and David Earl, the newly reconfigured council Monday was responding to widespread fears that the project could endanger the base, a pillar of the local economy.

More than 1,500 people signed petitions opposing the project in just a few hours on Easter Sunday, one day after the council voted 4-3 to go ahead with the project.

The Del Rio City Charter includes a provision allowing citizens to force a referendum to overturn certain council actions. This became unnecessary when project opponents took control of the council in the recent municipal elections.

"We decided to do it ourselves to save the taxpayers money, instead of holding a referendum," said newly elected Mayor Efrain Valdez, who ousted incumbent Dora Alcala, a project supporter.

"Of course, we'll fight the suit too. We're not just going to roll over and give him everything he wants," he said of a lawsuit the developers filed against the city.

Earl and Schaefer have acquired 3,200 acres just west of the Air Force base for a proposed \$750 million multiuse project that included housing for an eventual 15,000 residents. About 34,000 people now live in Del Rio.

Opponents of the project say it would encroach upon Laughlin and also represents a sweetheart deal for the out-of-town developers.

Critical to the project's viability was its designation in December as a Tax Increment Reinvestment Zone. This would allow developers to pay for infrastructure such as roads and sewers with money that otherwise would have gone for taxes.

Earl's suit claims the city has breached its contract with the developers. It seeks unspecified damages.

"You can't unilaterally cancel a 25-year binding contract. You are bringing upon yourself the potential of tens of millions of (dollars in) damages," said T.J. Connolly, a spokesman for the developers.

Connolly said work on the project would continue until a court orders a halt.

"We're going to honor our contract with the city of Del Rio until such time as we are told not to by a judge. We will continue to put in roads and with our engineering," he said.

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Del Rio's lawyer, Robert Heath of Austin, however, said the city believes it is on solid legal ground to back out of the deal.

"Obviously he'll push his claim in court, but the city certainly believes that there are no damages," Heath said, referring to Earl.

"The developer claims that the referendum option doesn't exist for this particular ordinance, but the city believes it does and that we've followed the will of the people," he said.

Robert Garza, a Del Rio lawyer representing project opponents and who had intervened in the lawsuit, said he didn't think SE Ranch would be able to claim damages

"I think the charter provision that allows the city to rescind any ordinance within 20 days of its passage will save the city," Garza said.

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Keesler AFB, Miss.



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Public affairs office honored

Keesler team kept base informed

By EMILY RANAGER

SUN HERALD

BILOXI - Members of Keesler Air Force Base's public affairs office have been honored with Air Force Achievement Awards in two categories.

The 81st Training Wing PA office was awarded the Director's Special Achievement Award in a Crisis Situation for its response in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

Lt. Col. Claudia Foss received the award for Outstanding Public Affairs Field Grade Officer at the Wing Level.

Before the storm, the PA office produced a supplement providing hurricane information, supply checklists and evacuation routes to Keesler families.

"The devastation meant that people couldn't go back to their homes. We had to tell them what that meant to them," Foss said.

"Internal information became our main focal point because information lines were down" she said, adding that PA produced a daily newsletter informing Keesler personnel how to meet basic needs such as food and clothing.

More than 6,000 personnel and their families were sheltered on base.

After Katrina, members of the 81st Training Wing, many of whom lost their own homes during the storm, performed humanitarian missions and debris cleanup at Keesler and throughout South Mississippi.

"What amazes me so much about this community is the can-do attitude both on and off base," Foss said.

"Our role as public affairs is to tell the story of the crisis," Foss said, "but if it wasn't for the efforts of the whole base, we wouldn't have a story to tell."

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LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Mayor Valdez, we need change

Editor,

Recent events in our city of Del Rio have been most riveting and disturbing for me and likely for many others. The concerns voiced by our citizens have been attention-getting and, in my view, both timely and right on target.

As a retired Chief and my last five years, of 28 years, spent at Laughlin Air Force Base, I feel strongly about preserving our now-unfettered air space and continued training our pilots - pilots who play a vital role to our national defense and freedom we enjoy in America. We should do all in our power to not let the BRAC have a reason to close our base. It does not require a marketing survey. It does not require an economic study. It does not require a feasibility study. What it requires is basic logic and common reasoning. Our city and Laughlin need each other - it is simple economics. Why should anything be done that would threaten this? It is unconscionable to permit any threat to our current interdependence of city and base.

Fortunately, there are some leaders in this city who have been most impressive and have stepped up to challenge the decisions made at City Hall. Mr. Nick Khoury, and Mr. Robert Garza, Esquire, have shown their leadership, sound decision making, and

genuine concern for both our city of Del Rio and Laughlin AFB. These leaders I hold in the highest regard; they have the willingness and desire to devote hours of their time to the continued progress of our city of Del Rio and Laughlin AFB. There are other leaders too numerous to name here.

I would be remiss if I didn't mention Mike Wrob, Claudio Sotelo and Pat Cole - leaders who have exhibited a resolve to ensure the best decision-making within their realm of influence. They have acquitted themselves admirably.

And finally, congratulations to our newly elected, The Honorable Mayor Efrain Valdez. Mayor Valdez, the citizens of this city have spoken loudly, clearly and resolutely. We, the constituents, who elect our public officials, must be heard. We direly need change and we have it.

Citizens of Del Rio, let us continue to be united with a firm resolve to preserve and maintain a vibrant and progressive city of Del Rio and continue to preserve our excellent relationship with Laughlin AFB.

And I sincerely hope we show our support for those officials, and other civic-minded leaders, to include Mr. Nick Khoury and Mr. Robert Garza, Esquire, who will lead us in a progressive, positive direction.

Respectfully submitted,

Dr. WILFORD W. BOX

Chief Master Sergeant (Ret.)

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Luke AFB, Ariz.



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Hantavirus death set off \$250,000 cleanup

Chris Roberts / El Paso Times
El Paso Times

After an airman training at Fort Bliss' McGregor Range died earlier this year of hantavirus, the post's garrison commander ordered a \$250,000 cleanup that included everything from fumigation to replacing mattresses, the El Paso Times has learned.

"We're very satisfied we've taken appropriate measures on this," said Col. Robert T. Burns, garrison commander. "It's tragic when you lose a soldier or an airman. We certainly didn't want to cut corners."

Burns said a comprehensive effort was made to ensure the buildings at three ranges -- Orogrande, Doña Ana and McGregor, where the airman was living -- were cleaned and sealed to prevent mice that can carry the virus from entering.

Senior Airman Leonard Hankerson Jr., with the 56th Security Forces Squadron at Luke Air Force Base, Ariz., died Feb. 11 at Beaumont Army Medical Center of hantavirus.

Although it will be next to impossible to ascertain where Hankerson contracted the virus, officials have said it might have been in Maricopa County, Ariz., where Luke Air Force Base is located, because there were two recent cases there. The only documented case in the New Mexico counties where the Fort Bliss ranges are located was in 1975.

And about 68,000 other service members occupied the 40 buildings on the ranges between January 2003 and March, none of whom were diagnosed with the virus, Burns said.

However, Hankerson's mother, Freddie May Curtis, said her son only spent a few days in Arizona and was checked by a doctor before he left, which leads her to believe he contracted the illness at Fort Bliss. The illness's incubation period ranges from three days to six weeks.

Curtis and another parent whose son trained at McGregor Range during the same time period say they aren't convinced the conditions at the range were adequate to protect the health of the trainees.

"My son wasn't supposed to die (that way)," Curtis said. "He went to fight for his country and he died at a base in the United States."

Greg Goff, whose stepson is an airman from Colorado Springs, Colo., now in Iraq, said his son was in the barracks next to the building where Hankerson bunked. Goff said his son talked of holes in the roof that let rain in and of the general disrepair of the buildings.

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"He's got a picture of water running from the ceiling, black water," Goff said

However, Burns said there has been continuous maintenance on the buildings that started well before the hantavirus case. Nearly \$3.5 million has been spent on range facility maintenance, which includes roof patching and latrine repair, since 2004, Burns said.

Although the living conditions at the camp are far from luxurious -- Burns points out the Army is trying to prepare troops for warfare in Iraq -- they do provide for all the basics required to maintain health, he said.

"They had adequate electricity, potable water and sewage support," Burns said. "They have adequate showers and latrines."

The only roof leak reported for repairs in the last few years was on Jan. 18, and it turned out to be a leaky water cooler, Burns said. That problem was fixed within two days, he added.

David Shafii, Fort Bliss director of public works, said there have been no other service orders for roof work on the building where the airman died.

An inspection of the barracks revealed "no substantial holes that penetrated from outside to inside." The only way the mice could get in was under the door or through small gaps where plumbing or evaporative cooler ducts entered the buildings, Burns said.

"The barracks were not infested with mice, although there were mice present," Burns said.

Another complaint was that soldiers didn't have access to appropriate medical care and were forced to travel to the nearest urban areas to buy medicine.

Soldiers have access to a medical clinic at the McGregor Camp that supplies over-the-counter medications, which means "they don't have to drive to the next town," Burns said. And, if more extensive services are needed, soldiers can be transported by air or ground to Beaumont Army Medical Center within an hour, he said.

Burns also denied reports that soldiers who suffered from flu-like symptoms, which are similar to those of hantavirus, were "told to suck it up or their training would be increased."

When the airman was first diagnosed, medical personnel checked for symptoms of influenza, streptococcus and pneumonia in people who slept in the same barracks or had close contact. Fifty-nine troops were evaluated using blood tests and chest X-rays. "Most didn't complain of further symptoms," Burns said.

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Of nine who did have persistent symptoms, seven were admitted. "I told them (hospital personnel) to just keep them there," Burns said.

All tested negative for hantavirus, officials said.

In the aftermath, the post dedicated about 3,000 man hours and about \$250,000 on maintenance that included repairing and replacing screens, weatherstripping doorway transoms, plugging the plumbing and ductwork gaps and making sure doors closed properly, Shafii said.

"We made sure not even an ant could get in there," he said. "I was there seven days a week for at least a couple of hours."

Also with that money, five buildings were fumigated -- the dining facility, the building where the airman died and three other barracks near it.

"We scrubbed that thing from top to bottom," Burns said of the barracks where the airman died.

An environmental contractor with excellent qualifications is used to make monthly pest checks on the dining halls and inspect barracks every three months, Burns said. The water, which is pumped by El Paso Water Utilities, also was tested and it met state and federal environmental standards. The McGregor Range is connected to the city's sewer system.

Chris Roberts may be reached at chrisr@elpasotimes.com; 546-6136.